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THE ROUND TABLE

THE PITY OF IT

"We have our next debate Friday," announced my boy, twelve years old, moping in from school.

"Good! What is the question?"

"American ships should pay half-duties for passing through the Panama canal. Wish I wasn't in debating!"

Imagine it!

Here is a boy, not yet in the high school, who is expected to develop interest in debating and public speaking by wrestling with a question that would require severe work from college students.

Neither he nor any other youngster of his age can reasonably be expected to know, except in an extremely general way, the matters at issue in the dispute over the canal dues. They are, besides, matters that depend largely on principles of international law, the facts of recent treaty negotiation, and the like, that the boys can read up on only with excessive expenditure of time. Further, much of the matter they would read could scarcely be comprehensible to them; it presupposes too much.

No wonder that so many children learn to dislike school work. No one can do tasks that are beyond him, and develop interest in his work. In the name of common sense, let us give the children exercises, problems, tasks, subjects, that are fitted to their years. Then the fault is theirs if they do not learn and develop.

But the pity of killing the schoolboy's interest by laying out problems, even the nature of which he cannot comprehend! The folly of compelling boys to be vague, superficial, bombastic—of leading them to think that bold assertion is proof—of training them to depend on generalities and "bunk"!

Better one thing the pupil can do thoroughly than a cartload of pretentious exercises.

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To the Editor of the "English Journal":

I have read with great interest, great delight, in fact, the article in the January number of the *English Journal* on "Oral English in College." Those who have read the article will, no doubt, know that

Mr. Clapp has not confined his discussion to college English alone, but has made some very significant statements concerning the use of oral English in the secondary schools.

It has been my good fortune to bear the brunt of organizing a course in English for our secondary school. The thing which we have most complimented ourselves upon is the effectiveness of our oral composition work, for the purposes mentioned by Mr. Clapp, and for others besides. To be brief, we are making oral composition the basis of all written work. Everything which teachers of English, *teachers*, I said, try so desperately to have expressed on paper, we teach directly by means of oral work.

In our first year in composition there is very little writing and a great deal of talking. In our second year, there is more talking, required and directed talking, mind you, and some writing. And even in our advanced composition we teach the essentials of form and arrangement through oral composition.

We have a sure basis, from the standpoint of apperception, when we have our young students begin with oral work; for of course, they all talk. Our chief care is to make their work seem natural and informal. When we get them started to talking, their eagerness is sufficient for all purposes of instruction. We have only to hold the reins and guide them. Whither and how do we guide them?

After a boy has acquired confidence enough in himself to speak out freely, it is but a step to show him that his remarks are more effective when given form and order. As we make narrations the basis of our early work, his first step toward technique will be to learn that his classmates and his teacher understand him better when he prefaces his accounts by giving the time, place, persons, and some of the circumstances of them. And there you have it. Is he not speaking the narrative which it takes hours to drill into him by the red-ink method? Then we lead him on to using descriptions in his talks, in which we quickly prove that his audience is better able to picture his images if he gives first a fundamental image—although we should feel strongly inclined to assassinate any visitor who called it by that name before our young students.

This method is used in the paragraph; it is used in exposition and argument; it is used in the long theme. In this part the class does "team work," wherein each is orally shown how to connect his paragraph to that of the student who precedes him. It takes one recitation to teach the idea of the setting, one for the fundamental image, one for

coherence, one for unity, and one for emphasis. After a few days of oral practice, we tell the boys they have been *speaking* themes, and that now they should write them. And there is no failure in transmitting the method to paper.

We use oral composition to teach written composition, because it is quicker, for every student *hears* the instruction, and gets it orally from the teacher, and corrects the fundamentals of technique on the spot. We use it for the same purpose because it saves work. Where before this we labored through a good half-dozen themes, trying to make a beginning, now we have a *first effort and a first draft* better than a seventh effort and a second draft with the old way. We use it because it is more effective. "It is possible," we have vainly said in the past that's gone, "for every student to write formally correct themes." And it was; but now formally correct themes come easily, and all the students write them.

Need I mention the increase in fluency, the poise, the change of attitude toward that old bugbear of a composition? Is it necessary to say that by means of our new method we have whole classes of helpful little critics, who eagerly, not shamefacedly, jot down in their notebooks the slips in speech to which their classmates call attention? Does it sound probable when I say our students are practically free from common grammatical blunders after a year of such teaching? It may not sound so, but it is more than probable; it is an accomplished fact.

Yes, Mr. Clapp, "oral composition will replace much of the written composition now taught in the high-school course." And the written composition will be better for it. Literary appreciation will be deeper and truer; the language of our students will more nearly approach the norm; and the bugbear of our English work will pass to that stage where successful composition work will be not only common but also required.

Sincerely yours,

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